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**“Where might we go if we dare”, moving beyond the “thick, suffocating, fog of whiteness” in feminism**

Gail Lewis is a leading black British feminist theorist who has been working for many years on interrogating racism, sexism and homophobia within her activism, academic writing and training as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. Her academic interests centre on the constitution of subjectivity as racialised and gendered, psychoanalysis, black feminism, experience as a site of knowing and knowledge production, social policy and welfare practice, psychodynamics of organisational process, multicultural and formations of national belonging. She is the author of many works, including: (1988) *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, eds S Grewal, G Lewis, J Kay, L Landor and P Parmar London: Sheba Feminist Books; (2000) *‘Race’, Gender, Social Welfare: Encounters in a Postcolonial Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press; (2013) *Unsafe Travel: Experiencing Intersectionality and Feminist Displacements for Signs*; and (2017) *Questions of Presence for Feminist Review*.

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Clare interviewed Gail in November 2018, and their conversation centred the question of ‘what haunts’ in her past and present intellectual, psychic and academic lives.

CH: Let me start by asking you some questions about social movements. What hauntings have you encountered in UK or European social movements and collectives you’ve participated in?

GL: Well... suppose I need to start with dis-ease because there wasn’t an ease anywhere really... It’s all from a place of dissonance and urgent imperative... The whole movement into feminist stuff was very much a *subsequent* move for me. For a long time I thought that feminism really was just for white middle class women and had absolutely no relevance to black and white working class people. It was not that I thought that questions of relationships between men and women were equal and didn’t need some major attention: I *absolutely* thought that – I mean I was taught the ‘truth’ of that watching my mother and her friends’ relationships with the men around them. But I didn’t think something called feminism could attend to that in relation to dynamic structures of race, racism and class. I had been fashioned in Marxism, so feminism and psychoanalysis were the petty bourgeois devils. But that spoke in a way to a split in me, because on the one hand as a stance of politics, ideology, I’d say, come on then get to the factory floor and then you might be able to tell us something about gender. I remember my first job was in a factory making brushes, and my role was ‘staff-

holer', drilling the hole for the broom handle into the brush head, so I kind of knew about the division of labour being between men and women's jobs, and rates and the physical demand of it. But then I went to Sri Lanka with the guy that I was married to then, he was going to do a PhD there, and he introduced me to a lower middle class, white life in Britain. So going to Sri Lanka, and suddenly being in a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country: that was amazing for me. It was the first 3<sup>rd</sup> world country I'd been to and it was absolutely formative because it was there I was told in no uncertain terms by Sri Lankan feminists: 'What do you mean it's only for white or Western feminists! That's what they might have you believe. You told me you were an anti-imperialist, well this is part of an anti-imperialist project! When you go back home, get yourself sorted', basically. 'You have a political responsibility, because these questions about gender matter to us as well.' I thought that if those brown women can do it then so can I. And it then allowed this split bit that knew from lived experience that gender mattered, and a politics organised around gender *mattered*, to come together so that I could come into feminism. So that's really what happened.

Then I found the movement here [in the mid-late 1970s] was divided between radical and socialist feminism, I thought well I can join the socialist feminists – that makes sense to me. I was a member of a group called Lesbian Left that used to meet at the Earlham Street Women's Liberation Workshop centre (I think that was what it was called); I worked hard to bring together those questions of class politics and sexual identity. As a group we struggled to work that out: that as lesbians we also had class analysis and that seemed to be linked to our sexual identity. That was really important but at the same time it was all white women, they were all white women, so trying to raise questions of 'oh but what about, oh but what about, oh but what about...' when I was intimidated by some of the women (women who felt terribly clever)... Now I'm not intimidated by them and in fact I think some may have become intimidated by me, probably. But it also felt really important to raise questions of racism in Britain at that time, the 1970s... All the immigration stuff, the virginity tests. I'd also been around Black Liberation organisations but I'd found it harder to settle in them, because of an inchoate something, something that I couldn't articulate but lurked... I wasn't out at that point, I didn't even know I had anything to out as it were, but at some level I did. I was a young woman, with very strong views about the need for class politics to be anti-imperialist and anti-racist - I absolutely knew that, and I could speak quite well even then – but I hadn't read loads... There was a kind of background haunting of: 'What about gender and what about – I don't know that I'd have called it sexuality then – but sexual life or something like that', because in my experience from looking at the women around me, sex, heterosexual sex and sexual life seemed to be linked with domestic abuse. These were hauntings I didn't have the language for, but something didn't sit comfortably. I'd go to one of the small Black Liberation groups that ran a study circle in Tottenham (we used to meet there once a week – it's hard to overstate how much emphasis there was among Black Liberation activists on combining action with study – with developing an analysis of the situation of black people, and others' who'd been colonised, that would inform the action). I'd go on demonstrations and things like that, but they were completely split from the feminist work until I joined the Brixton Black Women's Group. That's where stuff began to coalesce and got put

together and made me start to think they're not in antipathy to each other: race and class and gender politics. They actually need to come together. We didn't call that intersectionality then, I guess we were beginning to think about 'simultaneity', coming out of Combahee River [Collective] in '77,<sup>1</sup> so that was around the need to think about what we called triple oppressions, all interlinked and mutually constituted.

CH: 'Simultaneity' is a nice term; you don't hear that very often do you?

GL: Simultaneity, because it seems to mean they're not completely analogous,<sup>2</sup> which is always the trouble, but they do *move* and that term seems to conjure a kind of inter-relation, inseparability in time-space.

I was involved in the All-London Anti-racist, Anti-Fascist Group under the leadership of Sivanandan,<sup>3</sup> and although everybody knew I was a lesbian, it wasn't spoken about – or at least not to my face, but everybody did know that, so I was out in that sense there, but they could never attend to feminism – couldn't really handle black feminist politics even – and so they couldn't know what would it mean to think an analysis through a feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-heteronormative frame. I think Sivanandan was amazing; his capacity to link a theorisation to a practice of politics on the streets, you know to embody, exemplify that link I mentioned before, about the stress placed on analysis/theorisation and activism. He could really understand what that small action in Leyton, or Bradford, or Birmingham, or Leeds, or wherever might tell us about the theorisations and the strategic political interventions and mobilisations – and so imagine if he could have helped us think through a gendered lens!!

CH: So it sounds like you're saying that people knew you were a lesbian but nobody had to speak of it ... Is that your sense of what it was, that it was easier to locate as private?

GL: Well, I don't think it was that it was located as private but more 'personal', 'personal and intimate life', and I think it was subsumed, so that if the women are organising in the airports against virginity tests, and doing stuff against the state and immigration law – which we were – and if the women are all really involved in leading the legal defence campaign around the riots, say in Brixton or Tottenham, and if the women are really leading the stuff in relation to inferior education and supplementary schools, then that's how gender is doing its work.

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<sup>1</sup> Combahee River Collective (1977) Combahee River Collective Statement. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed B Smith. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Hazel V Carby describes the 'simultaneity' of black women's experience of oppression in (1982) *White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood*. *Black British Feminism: a Reader*, ed Heidi Safia Mirza. London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 45-53.

<sup>3</sup> A. Sivanandan (1923-2018) was the Director of the Institute of Race Relations and the founding editor of the journal *Race & Class*.

And yet we don't have to theorise it through the lens of 'simultaneity' or 'intersectionality'. The women are doing the work and 'the work' is understood only through an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, Marxist – and implicitly masculinist – theorisation of activism. Activism was understood in a singular way, even if it happened in a multiplicity of places/spaces of life: work, the court room; the police station; the school; the local and central state. But that's what always happens. It happens in all our kitchens, because whether they're from the Caribbean or from the African Continent or South Asia the women were leading from the kitchen. And by 'the kitchen' I mean an understanding that the lived realities and social relations of the kitchen were as much about politics as everything else, including the bedroom. And I also mean that 'the kitchen' was and is a place of political learning and theory-making. So, there's a way in which it could be imagined in this idealised way and split off any need to do any work. So I think it was more in that kind of register, and then of course we would – we being me, and Avtar [Brah] who was with Southall Black Sisters then, and Gerlin Bean – and all these people would raise these questions with the guys. In Brixton we had a very tense relationship with *Race Today*,<sup>4</sup> around feminism really, but they didn't just write us off, and it wasn't really hostile. The Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG) gathered pace really as a group, through the links with Harringey Black Sisters, women from Manchester, and started to form OWAAD [Organisation for Women of Asian and African Descent], as we gathered the pace and then got the Centre, got an institutional space that was ours. Then we were taken very seriously but with a lot of ambivalence... And fear... because we were beginning to be recognised as the voice that would bring together local activisms with more national activisms, and that we would refuse to let gender be a ghostly presence. It was having to come to the fore and we were needing to think about them, race, class, gender and sexuality as in articulation or simultaneity.

CH: You mentioned OWAAD, and I was just thinking of one of the other things that keeps coming up from that period, is the question of who nestled under the category 'Black'? Can you say a bit more about that and about what that included and who and how that might have shifted as well?

GL: I think the first thing to say that's really important is that although I think that category, the so called 'political black', held strongest in feminist organising and in trade union organising, it didn't only come from feminism. In fact, Sivanandan and the Institute [of Race Relations] were key, along with Colin Prescod, so there was Siva from Sri Lanka, Colin from Trinidad, who were brothers in arms, and beloved friends. But they would represent something that was a manifestation of 'political blackness' through the register male. But they did and they insisted, insisted, insisted, insisted, insisted. And then that ricocheted into us. We also felt that that was really important to do that kind of solidarity coalition work because what we were doing was saying we disconnect the signifier from bodies. It's not just that Asians are not 'really' black, we too are

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<sup>4</sup> *Race Today* was an anti-racist British magazine that ran from 1969-1998. It was launched by the Institute of Race Relations, and taken over by the *Race Today* Collective from 1973.

not 'really' black *until we claim it*. We *too* being African descent people. But although much of the dominant narrative is that a fault-line ran through it leading to domination of the African bit of 'black', African diaspora bit of 'black', and to the subordination and exclusion of the Asian bit of 'black', and that it was criticised for that, that's not the only part of the story. And that narrative may be as much a product of historical reconstruction as it was a tension at the time. I don't know, but I do know that there were many people of African descent who also didn't like it, didn't like use of the term 'black' as an all-encompassing sign under which multiple constituencies could convene, and whose politics were organised around a different form of gender politics - what might be termed a more Africanist or Afro-centric orientation, like the East London Black Women's Group. ELBWO were aligned to OWAAD, but offered a different perspective and whose political understanding was - I don't want to talk for them but this is my understanding *now* of their position:- we do need to have coalition work, but just as some of the Asian sisters might say " 'but we can't occlude, or erase the cultural specificities', that's really important for us from the African diaspora too. Not least because we're thought of as not *having* culture". Anyway that has to be true if a central tenet of our political analysis and understanding and driver of our activist interventions, is the spatio-temporal and dynamic *situatedness* of the social, of the organisation of domination and exploitation, and of lived experience. Whatever. But the point is the dominant narrative is that OWAAD fell apart because there was a fault-line running through the category 'Black', and because of sexuality. And I think those two things were around but were they alone combustive enough to lead to the implosion of OWAAD? I don't know. At the same time, I think the fault-line was larger than it's been presented: something about the model of organising that predominated; of what it takes to sustain that level of activism - a woman/women just get tired! I don't know but I'm just saying I think a fuller reconstruction is needed.

CH: I know by the '80s you were involved in feminist journals and so on... Had you already been to university in that period?

GL: How did I go to university? Because I went to Sri Lanka! ... But also because I worked as a library assistant in UCL, and I'd seen the students and I thought, maybe I could do that... If they can do it, maybe I could... I used to have to shelve in American History section, and I'd have all these African American texts. Look at all this work! I never knew all this history was written somewhere. The Caribbean section! I went to Sri Lanka, was educated and sustained by feminists there and I thought when I go back I'm going to do my A levels, I'm going to FE [Further Education] college and I'm going to try to go to university and study Social Anthropology. So, I did that, and of course at that time you could still get a maintenance grant for FE, so it made it possible as well. So, I did my A levels and went to LSE, Social Anthropology, which I hated, absolutely hated, but it was all at the height of activism and everything... And then I went to Sussex - to the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex - and did an MPhil. And I think I had thought that I would try and go and live in the Caribbean. I did my dissertation on the agricultural plan: its contradictions and contributions to the formation of Che's 'New Man' - see I was even interested in the formation of subjectivity then, though I didn't know it as that! But I thought if I understand something about

agricultural development that it would set me up to be able to go live in the Caribbean but when it came to it I didn't do that because what was haunting that was my sexuality. In the end, I had got involved with people and stuff, so there was a life here, but it was also like can I really do that? How would I do this? It didn't feel possible. Then.

The first thing in terms of journal work was me, Pratibha [Parmar] and Val [Amos] doing 'Many Voices, One Chant' for *Feminist Review* 17 in 1984.<sup>5</sup> And that's because we'd been involved in the feminist movement, but critiquing all the time, all, all, all the time. I mean it was exhausting really, though I had good friends and lover relationships with some of the white women as well, but battling, battling, battling. I can't remember how we came to do the special issue. But we thought that would be part of an intervention, because one of the things we constantly critiqued was the ways in which, socialist feminists (feminism generally) say yes, yes, we must attend to racism, but never give over any of the infrastructure. So that then it's not just on the terms of the white women who are in command. And we knew that there was masses going on, but we needed to try and put out the special issue and make an intervention... A bit like *Conditions* 5 had done with Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith editing 'The Black Women's Issue' in 1979.<sup>6</sup> So we did that, but there were always constant battles... There was *Spare Rib*; some of the other women had decided to produce *Outwrite* – Liliane Landor, Shaila Shah and a few others, one or two of whom were white – to do a kind of women of colour intervention, as we'd call it now. But although they were anti-imperialist they called themselves radical feminists: weird. I never really understood it! Because they said there's class as well, but it was something in the way they conceptualised patriarchy as more foundational.

What all this exemplifies is that there were lots of critiques of dominant white feminism made by black and other feminists of colour, and I think in that context we got invited - me, Kum-Kum [Bhavnani], Avtar Brah, Naila Kabeer, Lola Young (and maybe Pratibha Parmar was also invited to join). I think it was around this time that we got invited to join *Feminist Review*. We went to a meeting and said: hmmm, not until you've changed a bit. Certainly what you take as core to the feminist project, that needs to change. And among ourselves we also asked: 'On what terms are you inviting us? What kind of gesture is this, in terms of an understanding of the dynamics of power?' But by then obviously they were very well aware of what was a ghostly presence. Really it's their whiteness that is the ghostly presence, but it's framed as lack of black voice. But what's blocking is this thick, suffocating, fog of whiteness. But then we did join it and then we left. We left *en masse*.

CH: From my own knowledge of working on the Feminist Review Collective, I've understood that those of you who had joined as black feminists left together

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<sup>5</sup> Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar, eds (1984) *Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives*. Special Issue of *Feminist Review* 17.

<sup>6</sup> Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, eds (1979) *The Black Women's Issue*. *Conditions* Five 2(2).

saying that you wouldn't return until you had some evidence that the white women on the collective were committed to thinking carefully and consistently about race (not letting you all do it while they got on with the serious socialist feminist business!).

GL: Yes! Or be the ones to tell us *how* to think about race. I think it's also that. I remember being at a meeting, and really being pissed off with them, especially some of them, who kind of spoke as if they knew all there was to know about racism because of who they had had meaningful relationships with at some point. In the end I just called them on it. I was saying, 'you cannot sit there with a kind of know it all posture and declare how we understand the racial formation in Britain now. There are other ways to think it, and *we are also here* with views about this. And you all can't just have the voice of authority. That was a really fraught meeting, I remember that. And it was like oh, 'Gail going off again'. But actually I think it was a transformative moment, because after that we did then come back. And then we worked on the journal.

CH: it's also interesting around heterosexuality or heteronormativity - the ways in which that male authority gets smuggled in in a feminist context, so that as a lesbian whoever you might have been lovers with would not have that level of authority...

GL: Perhaps what we didn't do as successfully, though, was to really say that whiteness needs to be taken up, not in a way to re-centre it, but actually taken up as a very easily occupied position of voice and authority and even vulnerability when it's linked to female gender. I mean the sort of classic thing that often black women/feminists will say when we get together: how unbearable it is that when you're with some white women and the question of race comes up and the white women will collapse into tears, like a classic performance of the fey little woman, who's not strong enough, like a little bird, that she might faint, and it feels like that has happened sooo often and it's just unbearable. That performance of the very gendered category that *you say* is a problem... here you're enacting it against us, which then of course repositions *us* as not really women... again... It's a whole enactment.

CH: So is what is actually haunting the white feminist position is that desire to still be vulnerable, dependent and to exercise the authority of white femininity?

GL: I think so. I think it's that, but I think probably it's a *retreat* into a position of safety that says when I'm vulnerable – retreat into that position offers a *fantasy* of safety – when they see anger at the injury they inflict through the performance of white femininity as threat of an assault, equating anger (and pain) with threat. Because they all say 'ooo you're so aggressive', you become the aggressive black women, you become Serena Williams on the court being able to beat the white opponent, basically. Because that is not supposed to happen. So one of the ways that the 'illegitimacy' of Serena's supreme athleticism and skill gets exposed as a general social code is in the way in which Serena is greeted by commentators from across the tennis circuit, with their repeated 'Look at her power, ah look'... and they really mean, 'isn't she kind of manly?' And I think that is the register in



which many white feminists greet and respond to black feminists who call them out on their racism. And there's something about that occupation of that 'feminine gender position', which, if you like, un-genders us, black women, in a way – and re-genders them.

CH: So gender is performative in the interaction between whiteness and blackness actually, or white women and black women.

GL: And then everything gets frozen. Because what do you do? We get pissed off and we walk.

CH: And there's a deep shame then about that position of whiteness because it is clearly not something that can be accepted, either, by the white feminist... so as you say... stasis...

GL: It feels like that anyway... With *Feminist Review*, they've done loads of work – whereas my experience on the *European Journal of Women's Studies* (EJWS) there was... I think... I feel like I need to be a bit careful here because I'm making myself vulnerable... was a bit different. Since I wrote that piece 'Unsafe Travel' about the German conference.<sup>7</sup> Since then some of the women associated with EJWS never spoke to me again.

CH: Was the piece about intersectionality as needing to be located from black feminist experience, and it isn't in Europe?

GL: That's right. I was critiquing what I see as a repeated refrain where a kind of divide gets set up: That feminist *theory* comes from Europe (with a few notable exceptions such as Judith Butler), and descriptions of experience come from the USA. I think there's been a whole trend of that, where what is deemed a proper theorisation of intersectionality as the category or concept has come from Europe, white women in Europe, and as an experiential thing stays with African American women in the US. And then at that conference black and other women of colour came with a lot of interest and generosity, including Kim [Crenshaw] herself – but many of us felt really uncomfortable. It was about the whole way in which the conference had been framed. 'Intersectionality question mark' 'Intersectionality?' And that question mark put everything under erasure... And then it got enacted at the conference. I was supposed to speak at it and I was ill and I wasn't able to: I went to it but I didn't speak. But there were also some black German women in the audience who felt *absolutely unable to speak. Unable to speak. Unable to.* And I just thought we can't be, *I can't be part of all this*, and not say something about it. Now I did do wrong in the sense that I didn't speak to my co-editors directly, and I feel I should have done so, tried to find a way; but the larger issue is that this is just another example of how the dynamic between black and white feminists around race – well whiteness really – can become so disabling and destructive. Even though I didn't know how to raise this with my EJWS co-editors, I did think: I need to write something about this. As a thing

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis (2013) 'Unsafe Travel: Experiencing Intersectionality and Feminist Displacements', *Signs* 38(4): 869-892.

about what happens in our world, our feminist world, of writing and practice and conferences. That's an example, isn't it, of how what you're not allowed to do is to say 'these issues are right in our front yard', they are 'our' (as in feminists') issues.

CH: But when called out by black feminists, white feminists then act as if the wound belongs to us so that *you're* not allowed to be the one who experiences the harm and then speaks about it. It's interesting how European black feminism is consistently erased – sometimes also by the fetishism of the term intersectionality – over other histories of black feminist theorising.

GL: And that's what I did in that piece. I talked about the displacement. But it shows how in terms of the journal infrastructure we can be members of the collective, or editors, but don't you dare bring it home... And don't you dare speak about it as a 'domestic-in-house' issue. Almost like the ways in which Left guys would say you're not supposed to speak about gender dynamics, you're exposing the dirty washing.

CH: I wonder if that question of failure or fragmentation only feels unbearable if you have a fantasy of unity in the first place...

GL: Yes, and fantasy of omnipotence in that you conquer all, and let's face it, one of the places that that is the strongest is in terms of (whispers) 'theory'. Oh the theorist! Oh theory! Genuflection, genuflection – and it is always a white feminist theorist, or at a stretch a black male theorist, but only rarely is a black woman, a woman of colour positioned as theorist of general relevance to the feminist constituency and feminist project writ large – relevant to *all* women not specifically racism and racial formation.

CH: I was thinking about your own work, which is incredibly rich and has always addressed these kinds of power dynamics in a beautiful intellectual way – your writing is fabulous. Is it possible to tell a little bit of a story about what some of the haunting preoccupations are in your own work?

GL: Oh god!! Why do I even write anyway, as I hate it so much? But, no, I suppose one of the things that's a haunting, linked to where I started to write in a way, is to insist that social welfare wasn't a gift from the bloody state, it was the state responding to and trying to manage working class activism; and in the context of the inculcation of a different imaginary of connection among 'strangers'. There was something about the idea that we were responsible for those that we did not know – the 'strangers' – as long as they were within the nation, within the boundary, this naturalised form called the nation. And of-course that would be ranked in terms of male breadwinners and dependent wives and children. You'd get child benefit (called family allowance then) paid to the woman because she gave birth. It was a framework of benefits organised around the construction of a naturalised gender order.

But nevertheless, there was a kind of responsibility to think about the welfare of 'strangers' you were connected to by this thing. And what I couldn't understand

was well why, since you've said all along that us people from the Caribbean and South Asian part of Britain and its Commonwealth (what was referred to as the New Commonwealth and Pakistan part of the population), why are we excluded? What's going on here? Let me understand this. A kind of naïve question, but that's the haunting. Why is there this exclusion going on? How can I get to understand that? And of course you begin to understand it's because of imperialism – oh yeah! So everything that's going on in my Nan's kitchen – my *white* Nan's kitchen – telling me about the rise of the welfare state and how you could walk to the corner and that's where all the men used to line up for work early on a Monday morning hoping to get picked out. Some were blacklisted because they wanted to unionise... And Churchill threatened to shoot striking miners back down the mines. All these kinds of things that I learned in my Nan's kitchen about class exploitation and lived experience and social justice. So, I had this narrative of class history and class struggle that led to being able to go to the doctor's, and get milk at school – and these all matter – but why is this racism happening, what's this racist exclusion? And how does it link to gender politics between men and women in the household? So in some senses it was just being of my generation, when the welfare state really meant something, when the symbolism of the gift of blood stood as the symbolism of the welfare state, which in its turn stood for the symbolism of collective responsibility, a symbolism for what it means for the citizenry to be responsible for each other and care - within a given set of normativities. So here was the paradox: connection and responsibility and care founded upon a discursive structure of hierarchy and inequality within a series of binary divides. And, of course, that comes from my Nan's and Mum's kitchens. The kitchens I grew up in. It was the blood of my mum who was *of* this working class, the blood of my dads who were from Guyana and Jamaica and who were also working class but seen *outside* of it. It was confusing but raised pressing questions in mind that, in a way, I am still trying to answer.<sup>8</sup>

So that's one haunting that led me to try and understand why the welfare state, that was such an extraordinary vision, but when mum wanted to have a hysterectomy, dad had to give permission and sign for it. What!? That was the protocol then. So then you get the gender stuff, and ok, family allowance was paid to the mum and that was good, that was *really* good in our household, like many others because dad, again like many, didn't always come home on Thursday night when it was pay day and give her the wages.

So, what I'm saying is that it was about profound queries from the domestic space that led into profound queries about another space of the domestic called 'the national'. And then you're into a terrain of the imperial: and that's what really haunts *all* this. The ways in which the imperial was all about the extraction of one set of things, including labour, and the dismissal and exclusion of another set of things. So I was just really interested in the welfare state because of this move of scale between domestic as household and domestic as national and its widening out into the colonial/imperial and the pulsating social vision that

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<sup>8</sup> These are themes Gail most directly takes up (though in a different voice) in *'Race', Gender, Social Welfare*.

narrows and expands depending on who – which people and constituencies – is imagined as contained legitimately within its commons.

But it's informed by a kind of family story, and at one level a child's (and then a teenage) way of trying to make sense of something, and at another level just saying that understanding the welfare state is crucial to understanding class politics and imperial politics. Now I know that the welfare state isn't about equality, it's about management, but one part of it was about claims, and organised claims, that were successful to a degree; we *need it*. But at the same time understanding how it has inbuilt into it the very inequalities and the reproductions of those, even inside change, that I wanted to examine. And that's kind of why I got into it.

CH: I think of you in all of your work, whatever methods you're using, as a deep empiricist. Because you're always interested in asking: What's the relationship between everyday life and the institutions that frame what's possible? What's recognised and not recognised, and how are people enabled or prevented from acting?

GL: And now I feel like where my work's gone – and that's because of the influence of black studies/black feminist studies – is thinking about all of that which you've just described and then how there is always *excess*, our lives are never fully encompassed and limited by all of these processes and structures, there's always excess. And that brings you back again to the quotidian, because it's in those places that the ways in which we exceed where we're supposed to be, even in our subjecthood, our subjectivity, there we can begin to think 'other possibilities *are* possible', other ways of imagining who we might be in the future if we do this now. Kind of like what Tina Campt calls 'futurity'.<sup>9</sup>

CH: Can you give an example of that; that's hugely important.

GL: Well, all the stuff about blackness. I mean, you know what it's like Clare in this thinking back, I mean I'm thinking about then now (with the things I think about now and that means I sort of think differently, awry to my earlier self perhaps), but if I think about the ways in which for example, I like to use music to think about re-presentations of black life, especially in ethnically mixed contexts. It's because it carries at least a double register: one is that it offers an example of the constant remaking of race in cultural practices and objects that fill our sensory and material space. So my 'Birthing Racial Difference' piece, which is what I call my Mum piece, on the original html version there were little clips of music embedded in it that you could play as you read; and those clips of music were about taking you into the soundscape and affective environment of our living room (or even listening from the memory of your own living room).<sup>10</sup> But it was also about the ways in which in popular music culture race as a reality

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<sup>9</sup> Tina M Campt (2017) *Listening to Images*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Gail Lewis (2009) Birthing Racial Difference: Conversations with my Mother and Others. *Studies in the Maternal* 1(1). Available at: <https://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/sim.112>

becomes materialised in the very production of sound that is listened to - that is named by us and others as black - is embodied in dance, is made sensorial: all of it is affective charge. The sound of the music was about all that even if it's a contestation of the stereotypes, the normativities through which black life is presented and judged, or if it explicitly declares and protests the realities of racism. In this way, 'race' becomes 'birthed', materialised in this double articulation of representation and protest. *But* and it is a huge 'but, it's also that the music shows black life *beyond* black *subjection*.

And I think, I may be pushing this too far, I don't know, but the query in my mind is, isn't this also what we are faced with as an opportunity through 'trans\*'. Here is life, beyond itself as 'gender': or at least gender as we know it. Not without the significant harms and pains of gender. Not in one single way but again in a double movement. On the one hand, it's not that everybody who identifies as trans\* or nonbinary says we occupy the same position or indeed share the same view about gender - it's not an identity thing. But it's saying look this thing that has completely screwed us all, killed us, *killed us*, called 'gender', that is so powerful - and I claim my black womanhood all the time, right?! - it kills us to occupy these positions as 'men' and 'women'. And then on the other hand, it's not one single way precisely because of what we were talking about earlier - that these structures of subjection, identity, sociality, embodied and psychic life are *always* in articulation with each. And in that context, as black people we need to be able to say we *are* men and we *are* women, because we're not supposed to be those things. But also, and here is perhaps a deeper radicality (perhaps?!), in one and the same moment we need to do that *and* say: life is beyond this. And what's driving those feminists who are so opposed to trans\* people - well it seems particularly MTF trans\* - are very confusing to me. In fact, I find some of the arguments so pernicious and offensive but beyond that it drives me crazy because it seems to take us back onto the very terrain that many of these same feminists wanted to bring down. It's like every single bit of solid ground that they thought they'd built - because they wanted to undo the very edifice of gender - they now want to build it back in. And others are coming along and saying we have to undo it again because it cannot be re-built on my/our backs. And it's frightening, yes, dismantling the architectures of subjection by which we know ourselves *is* frightening, but you've got to undo it again, because retreat into the apparent safety of the very normativities that you/we protested with such determination will not save you and they will destroy me/us. Here again there's an echo with what we were talking about earlier - that when black feminists call out white feminists over their racism, often times they retreat into the fantasy of the apparent safety white feminine fragility. I mean it just drives me absolutely mad - and I don't know, I don't know how to theorise it (it's not my life in that sense), but I do know that I'm presented with something that says there is a real urgency to think this through and at the other end we might be able to live ourselves differently.

CH: So maybe one of the things that a non-binary position does is that it presents conversations between people who have not been *allowed* access to womanhood. But how does one talk across those different failures of being able to access gender?

GL: In Fanon's words, the fact that we are as black colonial subjects produced in the place of the look of the other, you always arrive too late, that's what he says. You always arrive too late into a place of subjecthood. Because he tells us 'I went from Martinique to Paris, thinking I was coming to a *world*, and then I find myself surrounded by "tomtoms" and "cannibals"', and all the discourses around cannibalism and savagery that construct black people as at the lowest levels of humanity (at best) or not human at all (at worst). And then, as a black woman or man, you always arrive too late. There's that double consciousness thing, saying both I can only see myself from that place of the white woman or man, *and* I see myself from somewhere else. And something about *that* possibility, that thing that *exceeds*, as also being the very condition of Black Atlantic life at least. That is the after-life of colonialism. Then, in a structure of articulation, as we've been talking about, there seems to be something of an echo into the double consciousness of seeing myself in the gendered position, from a place of the look of the one who would fix *me* in gender from *their* gendered position, but then also seeing myself as something else. Not in the other one, but something else, something beyond the scopic frame of the dominant one. So that thing about excess, as an engagement with one's own life, and humanity beyond the categories seems vitally urgent to work with and develop. And I am not sure that the feminist project is able to offer a framework for that but rather it requires us to think through and with the frame of what we might call black personhood otherwise; trans\* personhood otherwise. And this then entices us to work with the idea of 'failure' that you referred to in a different way: to push it more toward 'refusal' and practices by which we lay down the things we need to do now in order to live futures differently, as Tina Campt urges us.

CH: In this special issue Alyosxa [Tudor] argues that you can only think of lesbian and trans trajectories as distinct *if* you imagine them as white. And that actually the minute you bring in imperialism, there's a kind of richness to the historical imagination and the inhabiting of simultaneity that allows you then to kind of be otherwise: outside of those categories. They make the argument then that trans\* offers lesbian feminism an opportunity to imagine itself other, undoing those histories that are not just about gender but also of heteronormativity and imperialism.<sup>11</sup> Starting from that familiar feeling of discomfort or excess as you say...

I know you've trained as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, and your work has got more explicitly psychoanalytic over time... What incited your 'psychoanalytic turn'? What does psychoanalysis enable you to do that you might not have been able to do without it, and is that in some way about hauntings?

GL: Because the unconscious always haunts, but it's a bit like the wind. We see its effects but we don't see *it*. And the wind connects and circulates. And we 'get wind' of something... But I suppose in the end the reason why I wanted not just to train as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, but to try and use it in my academic

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<sup>11</sup> Alyosxa Tudor (2019) Im/possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender. *Feminist Theory* 20(4): xx-yy.

work is because of being on the couch myself as a patient or analysand. On one level it's a kind of discourse that is so conservative in so many ways, or at least in its application. And yet, it saved my life really – along with black people – well I suppose lots of things saved my life, including activism – but psychoanalysis helped me (or my analyst did) detoxify the racism that had enveloped me and which I had embodied. There's no doubt about it, it helped me to occupy myself. So if we think about psychic life as a condensed site – not just things *in* us in some naturalistic, essentialised way – but a site of what's come before us to make us, us, then we get a sense of just how powerful it is and what a struggle it is to not just return repeatedly into a community of marginalised positions both in the way we take up positions in the social world but also positions in our 'internal' landscapes. When we get stuck in that kind of place – a place that we might characterise as perpetual grievance as opposed to grief and mourning and opposition and refusal – then we are locked in a repetition compulsion where instead of re-memorising we (re)enact repeatedly in a cycle of trauma produced by the toxicities of misogyny and racism and heteronormativity and class based hatreds. And in that stuckness the social and psychic costs of these toxicities just builds up.

'Knowing' about all this is pretty hard at times but I think psychoanalysis both helps us to bear knowing something of the unconscious, psychic aspects and offers a reading position from which we can, in combination with a variety of critical social and cultural theory help us to understand in more complex ways the social and culture effects of these toxicities. So I think there's something powerful that psychoanalysis can offer that might be deployable as we try and gather up from all the work that we all do and try to make life a bit different. Because it's so, so hard at times. You know, just as racism is toxic, all those things are toxic, toxic for the ones that inhabit them, whiteness is toxic for people who really embed themselves in it – or the moments that they do... And I don't mean there's a simple structure of equivalence there between the experience of racism (of different kinds) and the violence that whiteness does to those who benefit from identification with it. But there *is* something really bad about whiteness, and having a theory of unconscious dynamics and psychic conflict and investments in processes even when known to be toxic can help us in the struggle against it. So I suppose what I am saying is that because the unconscious is a theory of excess in some sense it gives us a way maybe to begin to think through, gather up and think through: Where is that excess expressing itself and is that about that thing 'beyond' categories? Can we harness it in? that project? And if so how?

CH: And the extraordinariness of the banal everyday as well, that is not to be dismissed.

GL: I think it takes a lot of skill. If we have a theory of the subject that says there's so much that's unknown and unknowable, then maybe we can say there's so much about human life that's unknown and unknowable. All these attempts through these categories to close it down in a gesture of holding in place the hierarchical valorisations of human (and non-human) life around toxic normativities, is also a way, an unconscious desire, to enclose that which cannot

be enclosed in its entirety. . So I think psychoanalysis gives a kind of architecture to begin to explore some of those things.

CH: I really like that in your *Feminist Review* piece on presence and absence – it's a very beautiful piece – you talk about the movement *between* rather than identity.<sup>12</sup> It allows us to think about the categorisations and the violences and the toxicities that emerge in the world we inhabit – inheritance – not to dismiss that, and not to erase, to honour the ghosts... But I also read *presencing as* a method for being able to do that honouring work but not be stuck in its damage. So presencing being both a kind of way of honouring the ghosts, and of opening up the possibility that *everybody* might be able to be different, right?

GL: Yeah, and that's an ongoing process as well.

CH: I taught that piece on 'presencing' this last year, and it was really important for the Black British students in particular. They thought it was the most amazing piece they'd read, precisely because of its foregrounding of the ability to imagine oneself (individually or collectively) otherwise.

GL: That's fantastic. That's the project. Isn't it? We have to. They're going to kill us. They are killing us.

CH: Across your work embodiment seems really clear, but less so sexuality. So pleasure is very much in your work, but the category or the subject position 'lesbian' or sexuality more fluidly understood in its relationship to gender, makes only a very *modest* appearance.

GL: I think that's true actually, and I don't know why it is... I don't really know. And I don't think it's because I'm hiding it. I suppose maybe, this is a guess, maybe because of our conversation, and because you've wanted me to think about haunting, but maybe sexuality – although it was hard to come out as me as a black woman as a lesbian, because I did believe when I was young that there were *no* black lesbians, you know – what is this madness that could make me believe that?! – but I suppose when you're excised from full humanity that's one of its consequences. And at the same time, I don't feel I've been as haunted by it as I have been by race. I mean *racism* has absolutely haunted me. I think that's because of the ways in which it was in the front room, and class wound has haunted me as well. But in some senses once I'd decided that I would come out, I didn't feel I was as haunted by it. It wasn't something I needed to focus on academically... I don't know where this feeling comes from, but this kind of imperative, to try and understand racism came from beyond what I was saying when we first started talking: but I didn't feel I needed to understand that. And even in my two psychoanalyses, sexuality hardly ever came up, interestingly, they didn't force it. I remember saying once: 'fuck, that beautiful black man, couldn't you just leap on'... what's his name?... plays Luther...

CH: Idris Elba...

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<sup>12</sup> Gail Lewis (2017) Questions of Presence. *Feminist Review* 117: 1-19.



GL: And I said oh yea gods, he's just beautiful. And I think she [my analyst] was a bit surprised. And I said you know the thing is I do fancy men, I mean I see lots of men that I think 'oh, you're sweet'. But I think early on I was always frightened of men, because there was a lot of violence. And I didn't know what it meant to be in a relationship with them. And my life, and there was another aspect to the sexual desire, was with women. That was the most I've ever done in terms of psychoanalysis, which given that people think that analysts are kind of obsessed with talking about your sexuality might sound surprising... But I think it was because there wasn't the haunting. Whereas I've spent hours and hours and hours and hours talking about racism.

The only thing I've ever written was 'lesbian discussions' in that special issue of *Feminist Review*, which was important to do.<sup>13</sup> It was a really important intervention to say, 'we're here' – and I was in the Lesbian Left group as I say – but as an object of trying to query away, and worry away, and say something about, I think people do it better than me. Better than I could do. I don't know, it's interesting isn't it? But if we frame it in terms of hauntings I think it's that.

CH: Really interesting... And then maybe that's not the site for you of what you need to *presence*. If presencing is the mode of grappling with ghosts and then also imagining what other forms of life are possible, once one engages them and puts them either to rest or brings them into the present, then maybe that's not necessary...

GL: And there are spaces where it feels important to declare oneself in some way. Like in the classroom I quite often do, or in events sometimes. But I suppose I just think, everybody knows that I'm queer/lesbian or whatever: I don't know anymore what the word to use is! I like queer but I think I've sort of said lesbian. I do want to say 'my love, with whom I have sex – it's not just love; we have sex - is somebody called Liliane, and she's identified as a woman'. I do want to say that. That feels important.

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<sup>13</sup> Carmen, Gail, Shaila and Pratibha (1984) *Becoming Visible: Black Lesbian Discussions*. *Feminist Review* 17: 53-72. Part of the *Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives* Special Issue referenced in note 5.